



In Iowa's Interest:

Iowa's Women Deserve Equal Pay for Equal Work

by Senator Tom Harkin

On April 20th, Iowans – and people across the country - observed Equal Pay Day, the date that marks the 110 extra days that women must work into 2010 in order to equal what men earned in 2009.

In 1963, Congress first responded to the wage gap between men and women by enacting the Equal Pay Act to end this unfair discrimination against women in the workforce. Over the past 47 years, we have made progress toward this important goal, but progress has been stalled in the last decade. It is unacceptable that a woman still makes only 77 cents for every dollar a man earns. In fact, this wage gap exists in every segment of our society -- women of every race and national origin earn less than their counterparts.

Make no mistake, the wage gap is not just a woman's issue. It is a family issue. Millions of families rely on a woman's pay-check to get by. Two-thirds of mothers are bringing home at least a quarter of their family's earnings. In many families, the woman is the sole breadwinner. And, during the latest economic downturn, more men have lost jobs than women, making households even more dependent than ever on women's earnings.

America's women are working harder than ever, but they're not being fairly compensated for their contributions to our economy. As a result, their families are struggling to put food on the table, pay for child care, and deal with rising health care bills. This isn't fair, and it isn't right.

To further address this very issue, I was very pleased to work to pass the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the first bill President Obama signed into law last year. Named for a woman who simply asked to be paid the same amount as a man for performing the same labor, the bill helps curb the unfair practice of pay discrimination. Iowans can hear Lilly's story firsthand when she visits Iowa State University on April 23 [more information on her trip can be found here: <http://www.aauwiowa.org/>].

On Equal Pay Day, we celebrate enactment of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, but we must recognize that it was only a step. We need to do much more. First, there are too many loopholes and too many barriers to effective enforcement of existing laws. That is why I strongly support the Paycheck Fairness Act. This bill would strengthen penalties for discrimination and give women the tools they need to identify and confront unfair treatment.

In addition, we must recognize that the problem of unequal pay goes beyond insidious discrimination. As a nation, we unjustly devalue jobs traditionally performed by women, even when they require comparable skills to jobs traditionally performed by men. Why is a housekeeper worth less than a janitor? Why is a parking meter reader worth less than an electrical meter reader? To address this more subtle discrimination, I introduced the Fair Pay Act to ensure that employers provide equal pay for jobs that are equivalent in skill, effort, responsibility and working conditions. We must act this year to pass this legislation, and eliminate the subtle and systematic issues that lead to unequal pay.

It's time to recommit ourselves to eliminating discrimination in the workplace and ensuring that all Americans receive equal pay for equal work. America's working women and the families that rely on them deserve fairness on the job. We must all work together to fight pay discrimination until we have achieved true equality in the workplace and there is no need to commemorate Equal Pay Day any more.